

7

The Impact of the Revolution

POINTS TO CONSIDER

This chapter provides you with an overview of the impact the French Revolution had on a number of key areas. These are:

- The dismantling of the *ancien régime*
- The economy
- The French army and warfare
- The territorial impact
- The ideological impact

Key dates

1790	June 19	Abolition of the nobility
	July 12	Civil Constitution of the Clergy
	November 1	Publication of <i>Reflections on the Revolution in France</i>
1791	June 14	Le Chapelier Law
	August 14	Slave revolt in Saint-Domingue
1792	August 10	Overthrow of the monarchy
1793	February 21	Convention accepts the <i>amalgame</i>
1796	March–May	Conspiracy of Equals
1802	April 18	The Concordat
1814	April 6	Restoration of the Bourbon Monarchy

1 | The Dismantling of the *Ancien Régime*

Most of the *cahiers* in 1789 were moderate and none suggested the abolition of the monarchy. Yet within a short time, beginning with the August Decrees and the Declaration of Rights, fundamental changes had taken place that swept away most of the institutions of the *ancien régime* and ultimately the monarchy itself. This prompted the American historian G.V. Taylor to comment that it was not the revolutionaries who made the Revolution but the Revolution that made the revolutionaries, as they became more confident and ambitious in their plans with each measure that was passed.

The most famous of the abandoned institutions was the Bourbon Monarchy, which was overthrown on 10 August 1792. However, this did not prove to be permanent, as the Bourbons

Key question

How radical were the changes created by the Revolution?

Overthrow of the Monarchy: 10 August 1792

Restoration of the Bourbon Monarchy: 6 April 1814

Key dates

were restored on 6 April 1814. The restored monarchy was in many ways different from that of 1789 in that its powers were limited by an elected assembly that had the right to pass laws. Assemblies during the Revolution were hardly democratic as, after the primary assemblies, voting was confined to a small minority of property-holders. An elected legislature, however, was to be one of the permanent changes brought about by the Revolution.

The reforms introduced by the Constituent Assembly (see pages 51–62) were to prove the most radical and the most lasting of the Revolution. The France of the *ancien régime* was dismembered and then reconstructed according to new principles. Most of the institutions of the old regime were abolished, never to return:

- the legal distinction between Estates disappeared
- the privileges of nobles, Church and *pays d'états* were ended
- the nobility was abolished (19 June 1790) although it returned under Napoleon
- *généralités*, *intendants*, the old courts of law and the 13 *parlements* were swept away
- the entire financial structure of the *ancien régime* was abandoned: direct taxes (the *taille*, capitation and *vingtième*); the Farmers-General; indirect taxes such as the *gabelle* and *aides*; internal customs; venal offices; the guilds and corporations all came to an end, along with other restrictive practices
- the Church was drastically transformed by the Civil Constitution of the Clergy – losing the tithe and its lands
- the sale of the *biens nationaux* was the greatest change in land ownership in France for centuries: a tenth of the land came on to the market at one time.

What replaced all that had been destroyed?

- The administrative structure of modern France with its departments, districts and communes.
- New regular courts of law for both criminal and civil cases.
- A centralised treasury with the power to tax everybody.
- The standardisation of weights and measures through metrication.
- Careers became open to talent in the bureaucracy, the army and the Church.

The three Estates of the *ancien régime* were also affected by the Revolution, though the extent to which they suffered or benefited is a matter for debate amongst historians. All this – both the destructive and constructive work – was largely achieved in two years and was to be lasting. It was a remarkable achievement.

Key question

What was the impact of the Revolution on the Church?

The Church

The Church suffered enormously during the Revolution. At an early stage it lost most of its wealth: its income from the tithe, its lands and its financial privileges, none of which were ever recovered. Later its monopoly of education was removed, as was its control of poor relief and hospitals. The clergy, in effect, became civil servants, as they were paid by the State. Many were



Poster showing the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen; August 1789. What do you think the government hoped to achieve by displaying the Declaration in this form throughout France?

better off, as they received higher salaries from the government than they had received from the Church. Yet the Civil Constitution of the Clergy, which was passed on 12 July 1790, produced a deep division within the Church (see pages 58–60). Those who did not accept it (about half the clergy) were persecuted as counter-revolutionaries. Over 200 were killed in the September Massacres in 1792 and over 900 became official victims of the Terror. About 25,000 (a sixth of the clergy) emigrated or were deported. Many parishes were without a priest and, during the dechristianisation campaign of Year II, most churches were closed. Even the constitutional clergy were abandoned, when the government refused to pay any clerical salaries in 1794.

In those areas where the majority of the clergy had taken the constitutional oath the result was a lowering of esteem for religion that lasted well into the nineteenth century. Many devout

Civil Constitution of the Clergy passed by the National Assembly: 12 July 1790

Key date

Catholics considered that the constitutional clergy were wrong to defy the Pope. The State was separated from the Church and was to remain so until Napoleon's Concordat with the Pope was agreed on 18 April 1802 (pages 197–8). Although the Concordat went some way to repairing and healing the divisions, in reality the relations between Church and State for most of the nineteenth century were embittered.

Key question

How did the Revolution affect the French nobility?

Key dates

The Concordat negotiated by Napoleon restores relations between the French state and the Catholic Church: 18 April 1802

The abolition of the nobility: 19 June 1790

The nobility

Nobles were amongst the early leaders of the Revolution but withdrew from participation in public affairs after 1792. It has traditionally been viewed that as individuals they were among the greatest losers from the Revolution. They lost their feudal dues and this in some areas could amount to 60 per cent of their income. 'We never recovered', wrote the Marquis de la Tour du Pin, 'from the blow to our fortune delivered on that night' (4 August 1789). They also lost their financial privileges and consequently paid more in taxation. The *vingtième* and capitation usually took about five per cent of their income: the new land tax on average took 16 per cent. They lost their venal offices, their domination of high offices in the army, Church and State and even their right to bequeath their estates undivided to their oldest son (inheritances had to be divided equally amongst sons).

On 19 June 1790 the nobility was abolished and the use of all titles was forbidden. From the beginning of the Revolution, nobles had been leaving France, and eventually at least 16,500 went abroad (seven to eight per cent of all nobles). The property of those who emigrated was confiscated and this affected between a quarter and a half of all noble land. About 1200 nobles were executed during the Terror and many were imprisoned for months as suspects. Nobles appear to have been the principal victims of the Revolution: many lost their lands and some lost their heads.

In recent years, the trend has been to revise and modify this traditional picture. It is now generally accepted that nobles who stayed in France were not extensively persecuted during the Terror. The majority retained their lands and did not lose their position of economic dominance. Napoleon's tax-lists show that nobles were still amongst the wealthiest people in France. For example, of the 30 biggest taxpayers on the Lozère in 1811, 26 were nobles. Under Napoleon many *émigré* nobles returned to France and began to buy back their lands. For example, in the Sarthe, nobles had lost 100,000 acres but had recovered them all by 1830.

Though precise statistics are not available for the whole of France, nobles overall may have recovered a quarter of the land they had lost. Members of the ruling political élite in France both before and after the Revolution were large landowners and high officials, both noble (those with titles) and bourgeois (those without titles) who came to be called **notables**. Owing to the economic disruption caused by the Revolution, they continued to invest in land rather than industry, particularly when so much

Key term

Notables

Rich powerful individuals – the élite who controlled the political and economic life of France.

land came on to the market cheaply through the sale of *biens nationaux*. The Swiss economist and historian Francis d'Ivernois (1757–1842) asked what Frenchman was mad enough:

To risk his fortune in a business enterprise, or in competition with foreign manufacturers? He would have to be satisfied with a profit of ten, or at most twelve per cent, while the State offers him the possibility of realising a return of thirty, forty or even fifty per cent, if he places his money in one of the confiscated estates.

This group of notables governed France up to 1880 at least, and in this sense the *ancien régime* continued well into the nineteenth century.

The bourgeoisie

Since 1900 the dominant interpretation of the French Revolution has been the Marxist interpretation, although this was challenged during the second half of the twentieth century. This was most clearly expressed nearly 60 years ago by Georges Lefebvre, and later by his disciple Albert Soboul. Lefebvre regarded the French Revolution as a bourgeois revolution. The commercial and industrial bourgeoisie had been growing in importance in the eighteenth century and had become stronger economically than the nobility. However, their economic strength was not reflected in their position in society. They were kept out of positions of power by the privileged nobility and they resented their inferior position. Therefore, a class struggle developed between the rising bourgeoisie and the declining aristocracy, whose poorer members desperately clung to their privileges. The bourgeoisie were able to triumph in this struggle because the monarchy became bankrupt, and needed the financial support for which the price was a role in governing the country.

According to the Marxists, therefore, the French Revolution was a bourgeois revolution. Albert Soboul maintained that 'The French Revolution constitutes the crowning achievement of a long economic and social evolution that made the bourgeoisie the master of the world'. He argued that businessmen and **entrepreneurs** assumed the dominant role hitherto occupied by inherited wealth, mainly landowners. These men, with their willingness to take risks and their spirit of initiative, invested their capital in business ventures. In this way they contributed to the emergence of **industrial capitalism** in France.

Responses to the Marxist interpretation

The Marxist interpretation has been challenged by a number of British and American historians. They point out that the bourgeoisie continued to invest in land rather than industry, just as they had done before the Revolution. There were few representatives of trade, finance or industry in the elected assemblies: 85 out of 648 deputies in the Constituent Assembly, 83 out of 749 in the Convention. Small in numbers, they did not take the lead in political affairs. There is no doubt that laws were

Key question

How do Marxist historians view the role of the bourgeoisie in the French Revolution?

Entrepreneurs

Individuals prepared to take risks with their capital to support business schemes which will secure high levels of profit.

Industrial capitalism

An economic system where money (capital) is invested in industry for the purpose of making a profit (the money which remains after all production costs have been met).

Key terms

Key question

On what basis has the Marxist interpretation been challenged?

passed which could eventually benefit the industrialist – for example, the abolition of internal customs barriers, guilds and price controls, the prohibition of workers' associations and the introduction of a uniform system of weights and measures.

Yet it was difficult to take advantage of these new laws until transport improved sufficiently to create a national market and this had to wait for the expansion of the railways during the 1850s. Most merchants and manufacturers were worse off in 1799 than they had been in 1789. The French Revolution was not, therefore, either in its origins or its development, carried out by the mercantile and industrial bourgeoisie.

Key question

Why were the bourgeoisie able to prosper during the Revolution?

Gaining advantage from the Revolution

Over the course of the French Revolution the bourgeoisie were its main beneficiaries and provided all its leaders after 1791 (Danton, Marat, Robespierre, Carnot). Many of the reforms of the Constituent Assembly were supposed to apply to all citizens equally but only the bourgeoisie could take full advantage of them. Workers and peasants benefited little when careers became open to talent, as they were not educated. When the *biens* were put up for sale they were sold in large lots and this, too, benefited the middle classes, as it was easier for them to raise the money than it was for the peasants. By 1799 they owned between 30 and 40 per cent of French land.

The voting system also favoured the bourgeoisie, as it was limited to property owners. Consequently, nearly all the members of the various assemblies were bourgeois, as were all the ministers. Most of the revolutionary bourgeoisie were lawyers. There were 166 of them in the Constituent Assembly, and another 278 members were public officials, most of whom had a legal training. In the Convention there were 241 lawyers and 227 officials.

Lawyers were among the most prominent beneficiaries from the Revolution, as they had the training to take advantage of careers open to talent. Many were elected to new local and national offices, which paid well. The central administration employed less than 700 officials in the 1780s but by 1794, owing to the war, this number had risen to 6000. Although the bourgeoisie had always filled the lower and middle ranks of the judiciary and the administration, with the Revolution they also took over the highest posts, which previously had all been held by nobles. Their dominance of the administration was to continue throughout the nineteenth century.

However, there were many of the bourgeoisie who did not benefit from the Revolution, such as merchants of the Atlantic ports, manufacturers of luxury goods, and *rentiers*, who were paid in ultimately worthless *assignats*. In 1797 *rentiers* lost most of their investments in Ramel's 'bankruptcy of the two-thirds' (see page 148). Nevertheless, most of the bourgeoisie did well out of the Revolution and would accept only those regimes which promised to maintain their gains.

The peasantry

It is almost impossible to divide peasants into separate categories: landowners, tenant farmers, sharecroppers and labourers. Although there were usually some of each category in the villages, most peasants did not fall into any one group. The majority held some of their land freehold, rented other parts and from time to time sold their labour.

The impact of the Revolution on the peasantry was a mixture of gains and losses.

Losses

On the negative side:

- Income was lost when a depression in textile manufacturing damaged **cottage industry**.
- In many areas rents rose by as much as a quarter, when landlords were allowed to add the value of the abolished tithe to their rents.
- Conscription into military service, in 1793 and again in 1798, meant labour was lost on many holdings.
- Dechristianisation in 1793–4, which in many parts of France resulted in the Catholic Church being persecuted. Many peasants were deeply attached to the Church.
- Peasants who produced for the market were badly affected by the Maximum on the price of grain in the Year II (see page 116) and by the grain requisitions to feed the towns and the army.

The result of all these measures was a widespread, popular resistance movement, which in the Vendée flared into open revolt. In Brittany and Normandy, where the abolition of feudalism produced few benefits as most peasants rented their land, there were the pro-royalist rebels – the *chouannerie*. In the south, too, there was widespread opposition, as the Revolution seemed to benefit the rich Protestants of towns like Nîmes rather than the local Catholics. In some areas this opposition was caught up in royalist counter-revolution but peasants generally did not wish to see a return to the *ancien régime*, which might bring with it a restoration of feudal dues. Their opposition was therefore anti-revolutionary rather than counter-revolutionary. They wanted stability, their old way of life and the exclusion of ‘foreigners’ (officials from Paris or from outside their own district) from their affairs, rather than a restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in all its glory. Resistance produced repression and executions – nearly 60 per cent of the official victims of the Terror were peasants or workers and many more were killed when the army devastated the Vendée.

Gains

Yet most peasants benefited in one way or another from the Revolution:

Key question

To what extent did the French peasantry benefit as a consequence of the Revolution?

Cottage industry

Small-scale textile production (spinning, weaving and iron work) carried out in a peasant's cottage or workshop and used to supplement income from farming.

Key term

- All gained initially from the abolition of indirect taxes and their total tax burden was reduced.
- Those who owned land benefited from the abolition of feudal dues and the tithe.
- In the north and east, where the Church owned much land, peasants were able to buy some of the *biens*, though it was usually the richer peasants who were able to do this. In the south-west even share-croppers bought *biens* and became supporters of the Revolution.
- Peasants also gained from inflation, which grew steadily between 1792 and 1797. They were able to pay off their debts with depreciating *assignats* and tenants were able to buy their land.
- Judicial and local government reforms were to the advantage of all the peasants. The abolition of seigneurial justice was a great benefit, as it was replaced by a much fairer system. The Justice of the Peace in each canton provided cheap and impartial justice.
- The right of self-government granted to local authorities favoured the peasants too, especially at the municipal level, where councils were elected and filled by peasants. Over a million people took part in these councils in 1790 and many more later. In the north and east most of these were rich peasants, though in Poitou poorer peasants, tenant farmers and share-croppers took control. Peasants looked on municipal self-government as one of their greatest gains from the Revolution. Both the self-governing commune and Justices of the Peace survived to play important roles in the nineteenth century.

Wages

The poor peasants, the landless day-labourers and share-croppers are usually regarded as among the greatest losers from the Revolution. They did not benefit from the abolition of feudal dues and they were hit hard by the inflation from 1792 to 1797, as wages failed to rise as quickly as prices. Many relied on cottage industry for survival and when the market for this collapsed, they became destitute. However, not all was loss. They did gain from the abolition of indirect taxes. From 1797 to 1799 they gained from deflation, so that by 1799 their **real wages** were higher than they had been in 1789.

The Revolution, therefore, affected the peasants in different ways but for most (as for most bourgeoisie) their gains outweighed their losses, especially for those who owned land. Peter Jones, who has researched the peasantry, concludes that: 'Those who managed to survive the dearths of the Revolution and the terrible famine of 1795, experienced a real improvement in purchasing power; the first such improvement in several generations'.

Urban workers

The *sans-culottes* had welcomed the Revolution and had done a great deal to ensure that it was successful. They were to be bitterly disappointed by the first fruits of the Revolution. Many became

Key term

Real wages

The actual purchasing power of money.

Key question

Were workers better off as a result of the Revolution?

unemployed as the *parlements* were closed and nobles emigrated. The Le Chapelier Law of 14 June 1791, while opening up many trades restricted by guilds, did, on the other hand, place severe restrictions on workers' rights to organise in defence of their livelihoods. In 1793, the CPS gave in to many of their demands, such as a maximum price on bread. However, the bourgeois revolutionary leaders were not prepared in the long run to grant most of what they wanted. The urban workers disliked a free-market economy, yet this was imposed on them in 1794, with the result that prices rose dramatically. The bad harvest and harsh winter of 1794–5 reduced them to despair and contributed to the risings of Germinal and Prairial (pages 138–9), which were crushed by the government.

Following the risings of Germinal and Prairial, workers played no further political role in the Revolution. Their economic fortunes continued to decline in 1797, owing to the inflation caused by the fall of the *assignats*. Wages rose but much more slowly than prices. There was, however, a revival in the last years of the Directory from 1797 to 1799, when deflation ensured that real wages were higher than they had been for a very long time. These were also years of good harvests, when the price of bread dropped to two *sous* a pound (it had been 14 *sous* in July 1789).

The poor

The poor suffered more than most during the Revolution. In normal times about a quarter of the population of big cities relied on poor relief. This number increased with the rise in unemployment, yet at the same time their means of obtaining relief were disappearing. The main source of help for the poor had been the Church, which had paid for this out of income from the tithe. When the tithe was abolished and Church lands were nationalised, the Church could no longer pay for aid to the poor. If the poor were ill they had been cared for in hospitals provided by the Church and these were closed because of the Church's loss of income. The Constitution of 1793 said that all citizens had a right to public support but revolutionary governments were always short of money and nothing was done. As late as 1847 the number of hospitals in France was 42 per cent lower than in 1789, though the population was seven million more.

The result of the decline in the Church's role in providing poor relief and hospitals was that the poor were unable to cope with the economic crisis of 1794–5, when a bad harvest was followed by a harsh winter. Many died, either from starvation or from diseases, which the undernourished could not fight off. In Rouen the **mortality rate** doubled in 1795–6 and trebled the year after. There was also a marked rise in the number of suicides. The poor responded in the only ways they knew, by taking direct action. Some joined bands of brigands, which were to be found in many parts of France in the last years of the Directory.

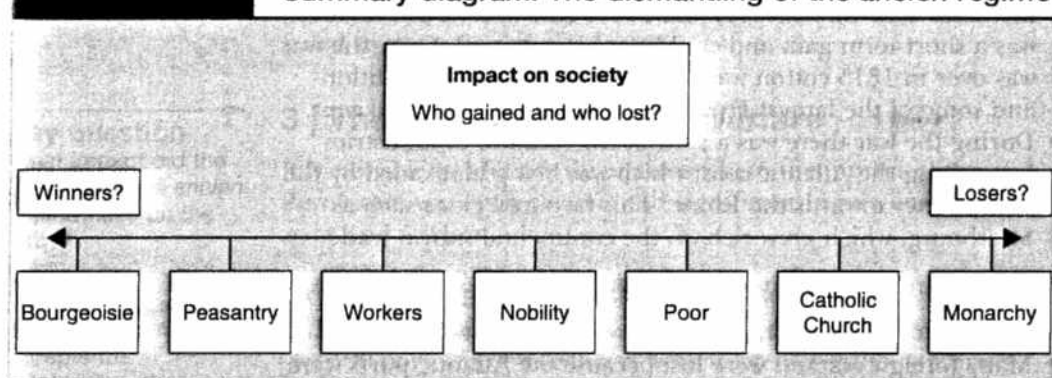
Introduction of the Le Chapelier Law, which prohibited strikes and the formation of trade unions and abolished guilds: 14 June 1791

Key date

Key question
How did anti-Church policies affect the poor?

Mortality rate
The death rate, which is measured per 1000 of the population.

Key term

Summary diagram: The dismantling of the *ancien régime*

Key question
How did the war affect French trade?

Key date
A slave revolt breaks out in the rich French colony of Saint-Domingue in the Caribbean: 14 August 1791

2 | The Economy

Marxist historians believed that by getting rid of feudalism, ending the monopolies of the guilds and unifying the national market, the Revolution, in Soboul's words, 'marked a decisive stage in the transition from feudalism to capitalism'. Not all historians agree with this interpretation. Alfred Cobban in particular rejects this view and contends that the Revolution was '... not for but against capitalism'. Non-Marxist historians opposed to the interpretation argue that the Revolution restricted, rather than promoted, the development of capitalism in France and that it was an economic disaster.

The most rapidly expanding sector of the French economy up to 1791 was overseas trade. On 14 August 1791, a slave revolt broke out on the West Indian island of Saint-Domingue, which provided three-quarters of France's colonial trade. This was followed in 1793 by war with Britain, and the blockade of the French coast by the Royal Navy. Prosperous Atlantic seaports such as Bordeaux and Nantes suffered severely from the naval blockade imposed by Britain, as did the industries in the hinterland – sugar refineries, linen and tobacco manufacturers – which had depended on imported raw materials. In 1797 France had only 200 ocean-going vessels, a tenth of the number of 1789. French exports fell by 50 per cent in the 1790s. Foreign trade had accounted for 25 per cent of France's **gross domestic product** in 1789: by 1796 it was down to nine per cent.

War had a varied effect on French industries. Some benefited and expanded while others declined. Among those industries and sectors which benefited were:

- Iron and coal industries that expanded to meet the demand for military equipment – cannon and arms.
- The textile industry grew to meet the army's demand for uniforms and tents.
- The cotton industry gained most of all. It had been virtually ruined by English competition but with the war and French conquests it revived. English goods were kept out of territories

Key term
Gross domestic product
The total value of goods and services produced by an economy.

under French control, so that French cotton production increased four-fold between the 1780s and 1810. This, however, was a short-term gain and could not be sustained. Once the war was over in 1815 cotton was hit again by British competition and some of the largest French manufacturers went bankrupt.

- During the war there was a shift in the location of industries from along the Atlantic coast which was being blockaded by the British navy towards the Rhine. This favoured cities such as Strasbourg, which grew rich on the continental transit trade.

But other areas and industries did not do as well:

- Supplies of imported raw materials were disrupted by the war.
- Many foreign markets were lost because the Atlantic ports were blockaded by Britain.
- The linen industry in Brittany (which had exported to the West Indies and South America) saw production fall by a third, while industrial production at Marseille decreased by three-quarters.

By 1799 industrial production in France had fallen overall to two-thirds of its pre-war level. When paper money was withdrawn in 1797 industry faced other problems. There was a shortage of cash, interest rates were high and agricultural prices (and therefore the peasant market for industrial goods) collapsed.

Agriculture stagnated during the Revolution. Production kept pace with population growth but this was done by bringing more land into cultivation rather than by improving productivity, which did not rise until the 1840s. Yields remained low and old-fashioned techniques continued. Oxen were still used for pulling wooden (not metal) ploughs and the harvest was cut with sickles rather than scythes. Most peasants produced for subsistence only and plots remained small, especially when on his death, by law, a peasant's land was divided up equally amongst his sons.

Impact of the Revolution on the French economy

The Revolution held up the development of the French economy, which grew only slowly until the 1840s. **Per capita** agricultural production fell during the period with a veritable collapse occurring between 1792 and 1795. It was only by the end of the Napoleonic Empire in 1814 that French agriculture recovered to its 1789 levels, while industrial production in 1800 was still below its 1789 level.

Although France had fallen behind Britain industrially by 1789, the gap between them increased even more markedly during the Revolution. Wartime disruption and dislocation in France undoubtedly contributed towards this. The death of between 1.5 and 2 million people also had a profound affect on the economy by reducing the market and the labour force. It was not until the coming of the railways in the middle of the nineteenth century that French industrialists could take advantage of a national market. Railways lowered the cost of transport and gave a great boost to the heavy industries of coal, iron and steel. Only then did factory production become the norm. These developments,

Key question

How did the Revolution affect the French economy?

Per capita

An economic measure used to determine output, calculated by dividing the volume or value of production by the number in the population.

Key term

Key date

Key terms

which occurred largely between 1830 and 1870, brought the economic *ancien régime* to an end, something the Revolution had failed to do.

Key question

What impact did the collapse of the *ancien régime* have on the army?

Key date

The Convention accepts the *amalgame* – the merger of regular soldiers and volunteers:
21 February 1793

Key terms

Regular army

The term used to describe the full time professional army. As events unfolded the white uniforms of the *ancien régime* were replaced by ones that reflected the colours of the Revolution: red, white and blue.

Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs)

Soldiers with ranks such as corporal or sergeant.

3 | The French Army and Warfare

It is possible to identify three areas where the impact of the Revolution was both obvious and significant in relation to the army and warfare.

Expansion and organisation of the army

In 1789 the royal army was very unrepresentative of the nation. Over 90 per cent of its officers were noblemen (who comprised between 0.5 to 1.5 per cent of the population). The majority of recruits were drawn from urban areas, only a quarter were peasants (as opposed to 80 per cent of the population). The army was also disproportionately young – over half were under 25.

As the Revolution progressed, its loyalty to the Crown declined, most notably following the flight to Varennes (see page 65).

Alongside the **regular army**, there emerged a new force – the National Guard. It came to symbolise the Revolution and the growing power of the bourgeoisie. On 21 February 1793 these two forces amalgamated – regular soldiers and volunteers.

When revolutionary enthusiasm was married to professional military standards a very powerful and effective force was created. Against the challenge of external enemies, the call to arms was answered by hundreds of thousands of young Frenchmen. Initially numbers of volunteers greatly exceeded expectations. By the winter of 1792 France had over 450,000 men in arms, a figure that would rise to over 750,000 by the summer of 1794. Although these figures fluctuated, largely through desertions, the sheer size of the military force was both impressive and intimidating.

The army and French society

Not only did the army increase in size, but its very nature changed as a result of the Revolution. The army came to symbolise the beliefs and values of the Revolution. In defending the Republic it was elevated in status and esteem in the eyes of the public, and assumed an influential role in society. It clearly adopted the principle of careers open to talent. Rapid and well-rewarded promotion for recruits from even the humblest of social backgrounds was an attractive possibility for ambitious career-orientated young men. If class was no longer a barrier to promotion, then neither was age. Joubert, Jourdan and Soult were all generals by the age of 30. Many an ordinary soldier would aspire to hold a field-marshal's baton, even if few would ever attain it. Almost a quarter of the generals promoted during the Revolution had been **Non-Commissioned Officers**. There was no better role model than Bonaparte himself, who rose rapidly up the ranks through talent and ability.

Successive waves of recruits, particularly the politically active *sans-culottes* from Paris and other cities, brought with them a

passionate commitment to the cause and principles of 1789, and a willingness to die for *la patrie* (the fatherland). The representatives-on-mission had considerable powers to enforce the political beliefs of the Republic. A military force, enthused with revolutionary zeal, allied to a belief in the justice of its cause and bound together in the defence of its nation, had not been seen in Europe in almost two centuries. Within France the success and achievements of the army were genuinely popular with most people.

Military tactics, strategy and organisation

New methods were adopted to organise the army during the revolutionary war. In previous wars, French infantry marched into battle in line formation that enabled them to concentrate their fire on enemy positions. In 1791 new regulations were laid down on how the French army was to be deployed. Infantry could approach the battle in column, then deploy into a line to fire, and then re-form back into a column without a great loss of time and momentum. These columns subsequently developed into attack columns whose key features were shock and mobility. The use of the numerically inferior attack columns did have one important limitation – although it gave commanders much greater mobility in the field it lacked the concentrated firepower of the line. To try to compensate for this, horse artillery was introduced in 1791–2 to support them.

A new tactic, which French armies developed to great effectiveness to support the attack columns, was the use of light infantry. Light infantry were highly mobile troops, deployed in patrolling and raiding – tactics known as **skirmishing**. These soldiers needed to be loyal, self-reliant and able to operate with a measure of independence. The high level of commitment and morale within the army, particularly among the infantry, allowed officers to disperse their soldiers for operational purposes into small groups. For organisational purposes the army was divided into *ordinaires*, small groups of 14 to 16 men who lived and fought together under the command of a corporal. These operated very effectively but the tactic was only possible because of good discipline and a high level of motivation and morale among the men.

4 | The Territorial Impact of the Revolution

The French Revolution and the Revolutionary War changed the map of Europe. During the Revolutionary War (1792–1801) France annexed large amounts of territory (see map on page 150 and page 152). With the exception of the former papal territory Avignon, all these territories were lost in 1815. Among the permanent changes resulting from the Revolutionary Wars were:

- in Italy, the city states of Genoa and Venice never recovered an independent existence
- Austria lost Belgium (previously known as the Austrian Netherlands)

Key question

What developments in military organisation and tactics were introduced during the Revolution?

Skirmishing

A small group of soldiers who operate independently, fighting minor engagements and living off the land.

Key term

Key question

How did the Revolutionary War change the map of Europe?

- the Holy Roman Empire was abolished
- the process of redrawing the map of Germany was begun by amalgamating many small states.

Outside Europe, the Revolutionary Wars enabled Britain to consolidate her Empire at the expense of countries that France coerced into alliances. The most notable example was Holland, one of Britain's most important trading rivals. Britain seized the Dutch colonies of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and the Cape of Good Hope (South Africa). Both territories were retained by Britain into the twentieth century. As well as being of strategic importance on the route to Australia, Cape Colony provided Britain with the base to expand her Empire into southern Africa, while Ceylon became an important producer of tea and timber.

Key question

What contribution did the Revolution make to political ideas?

5 | The Ideological Impact of the Revolution

The momentous and dramatic events of the period 1789–99 made an enormous impact on France in particular and Europe in general. One of the most influential legacies of the Revolution to future generations was in the field of ideas. The ideological impact of the Revolution long outlasted the structural and territorial changes created by the Republic. There are a number of areas where the ideological impact of the Revolution was significant.

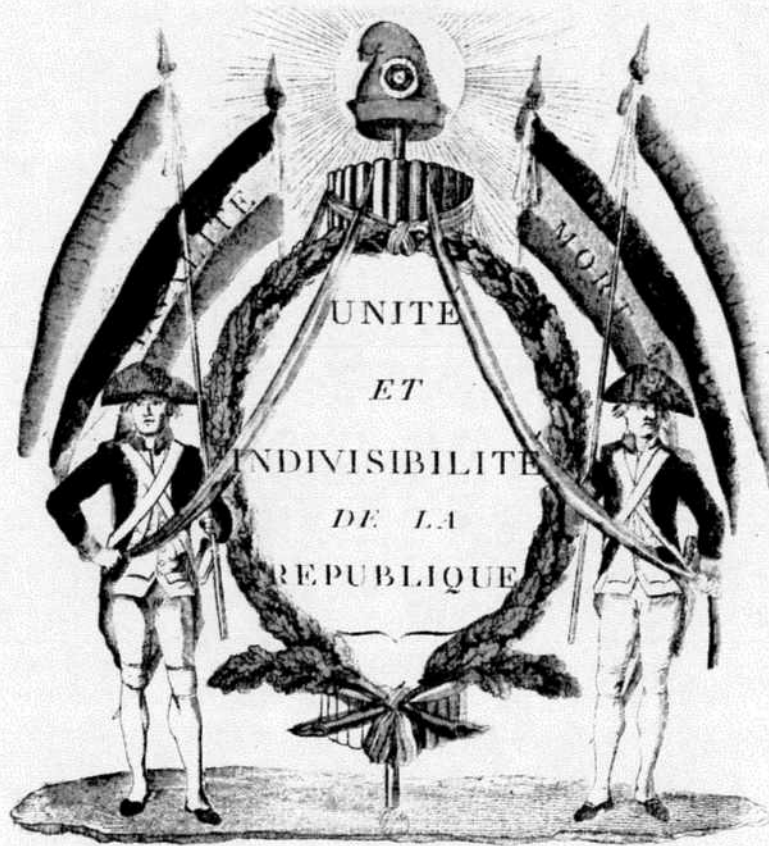
Democratic republicanism

It is arguable that the most important ideological legacy of the Revolution was democratic republicanism. The French Revolution had a profound effect upon the ideas people held and therefore on the policies they pursued. The veteran radical Dr Richard Price remarked that he was thankful to have lived through such an eventful and inspirational period. He hoped that British reformers would also take the initiative. Many British writers such as the poet William Wordsworth and the radical thinker Tom Paine did react positively to the Revolution but they tended to be in a minority. Wherever French armies went in their wake they spread French ideas and methods, as they created republics, established representative government, seized Church lands and abolished privilege. These reforms and structures could be, and often were, reversed when the French withdrew. But ideas could not be eradicated so easily. Among the most influential, important and appealing of these ideas and concepts were:

- the sovereignty of the people
- equality before the law
- freedom from arbitrary arrest
- freedom of speech and association
- careers open to talent.

Conservatism

The violent and bloody birth of the First Republic did alienate many French people and a significant number of Europeans against democratic republicanism. In the eyes of many,



A painted board publicising the unity and indivisibility of the Republic. This board is a good example of the importance the Republic placed on propaganda. Note the revolutionary symbols contained within the image – the *bonnet rouge*, the national guard and the words liberty, equality and fraternity.

republicanism became synonymous with Jacobinism and Terror. The changes that occurred in France were clearly not welcomed by everyone. When so many established institutions, beliefs and practices were attacked – monarchy, religion, privilege – some writers came to their defence and the ideology of conservatism evolved. One of the first writers to mount a sustained attack on the Revolution was Edmund Burke. In his book *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke defended tradition, religious faith and slow change. He argued that violent revolutions produced chaos and ultimately tyranny:

I do not know under what description to class the present ruling authority in France. It affects to be a pure democracy, though I think it in a direct train of becoming shortly a mischievous and ignoble oligarchy [rule by a minority].

Publication of Burke's book, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which was critical of events in France: 1 November 1790

Key date

Burke's ideas inspired among others the Austrian statesman Metternich, who was a central figure in European affairs in the post-1815 period. Rulers who had supported reform in the 1780s now regarded it as dangerous and so there was a conservative reaction that lasted well into the nineteenth century. Conservative ideas were not the only ones produced by the French Revolution.

The definitive reply to Edmund Burke's attack on the Revolution was Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*, published in 1791. There were many revolutions during the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly in 1830 (France, Belgium, Italy, parts of Germany and Poland) and 1848 (France, Austria, Italy, Germany), largely because the French provided a model, which others sought to copy. Paine supported the principle of change when he commented:

Every age and generation must be free to act for itself in all cases as the ages and generations which preceded it. The variety and presumptions of governing beyond the grave is the most ridiculous and insolent of all tyrannies.

Liberalism

The revolutionaries, following their assault on privilege and absolutism, stressed the rights and liberties of individuals. This was clearly outlined in the Declaration of the Rights of Man (see page 42). A number of these principles would, in the mid-nineteenth century, be refined and recast as liberalism. Among the core values of **liberalism** are:

- freedom of thought and conscience on all subjects (including religion) leading to freedom of expression and publication
- freedom of action and taste as long as it involves no harm to others
- freedom of individuals to unite as long as their union does not harm others.

Even within France, however, many of these ideas were ignored in practice during the Revolution – notably during the Terror. They nevertheless contributed to the **revolutionary myth**, which influenced so many people outside France, particularly middle-class liberals. Liberalism in the nineteenth century owed much to the French Revolution. The ethos of republicanism and the new networks of friendships and associations that it inspired was one way in which the Revolution left its mark on politics and political culture. In the longer term the legacy of the revolutionary struggle highlighted the possibilities for others confronted with oppression, particularly in Russia.

Jacobinism – Socialism – Marxism

Jacobinism during the Revolution is equated with revolutionary action in defence of the Republic and the rights of ordinary citizens. The debates in the Jacobin club and the speeches and writings of its principal figures proved influential to future generations of left-wing idealists and revolutionaries. Following

Key terms

Liberalism

A political belief which stresses the rights and liberties of the individual.

Revolutionary myth

The frequently misguided belief that direct revolutionary action can bring about significant material improvement for the majority of society.

Key question

What was the long-term political influence of Jacobinism?

the closure of the Jacobin Club in November 1794, disenchanted idealists who opposed the Thermidorian reaction planned an uprising. Babeuf's Conspiracy of Equals during March–May 1796 (see page 146) clearly failed in its goals yet its core values – universal suffrage, liberating the oppressed, equality for all – helped lay the foundations of one of the nineteenth century's most important political philosophies: socialism. Jacobinism also helped sustain the revolutionary ideal of direct action – the *journées* manning the barricades – a tradition that resurfaced during the French Revolutions of 1830, 1848 and 1871.

In 1848 Karl Marx published the *Communist Manifesto*. Marx owed a large debt to the Jacobin and later French socialists whose theoretical works and ideas revealed the possibilities that opened when committed individuals challenged the status quo. Marx's ideas in turn influenced the Russian revolutionaries. His analysis of economic and social change inspired a whole generation of French historians such as George Lefebvre and Albert Soboul to produce studies based on Marx's ideas. Marx interpreted history as a number of revolutionary phases leading ultimately to an **egalitarian society**. Feudalism would be replaced by bourgeois capitalism, which in turn would be replaced by socialism. For Marxist historians, the French Revolution witnessed the critical stage of the destruction of feudalism and the birth of capitalism.

Nationalism

Nationalism was another powerful force that the French Revolution unleashed. Revolutionary leaders had deliberately set out to create a unified nation, by getting rid of all provincial privileges, internal customs duties and different systems of law. Sovereignty, said the Declaration of Rights, resides in the nation. Symbols such as the *tricolore* (the new national flag of France), the *Marseillaise* and huge national festivals (the first of which was the *Fête de la Fédération* on 14 July 1790 to celebrate the fall of the Bastille), were all used to rouse patriotic fervour. Army life also helped to create loyalty to the nation. Time served in the army was often the first occasion on which peasants had been outside their own locality or had come into contact with the French language (inhabitants of Brittany for example spoke Breton).

However, the success of revolutionary leaders in uniting the nation should not be exaggerated. As late as the Third Republic (1871) peasants in the south and west still had local rather than national loyalties and looked on people from outside their area as unwelcome 'foreigners'. Yet France's success in her wars was often attributed to nationalism and the *élan* of the French soldier. Many outside France were inspired by the right to **national self-determination** that the French proclaimed. In Italy national feeling was aroused, partly by the French example, and in Germany people also began to look to the formation of a united Germany.

One of the great legacies of the French Revolution was the principle of the right to resist oppression, which was enshrined in the Constitution of 1793. Kolokotronis, a Greek bandit and patriot, said that according to his judgement:

Egalitarian society

Where citizens enjoyed equal rights and are not discriminated against on the basis of gender or social class. This is neatly summed up by the phrase most frequently linked with the Revolution – liberty, equality and fraternity.

Key term

Key question

What did the French Revolution do to inspire national identity?

Tricolore

The symbol of the Revolution. It combined the red and blue colours of Paris with the white of the Bourbons.

Élan

Patriotic enthusiasm, commitment and identity with the revolutionary cause within the army.

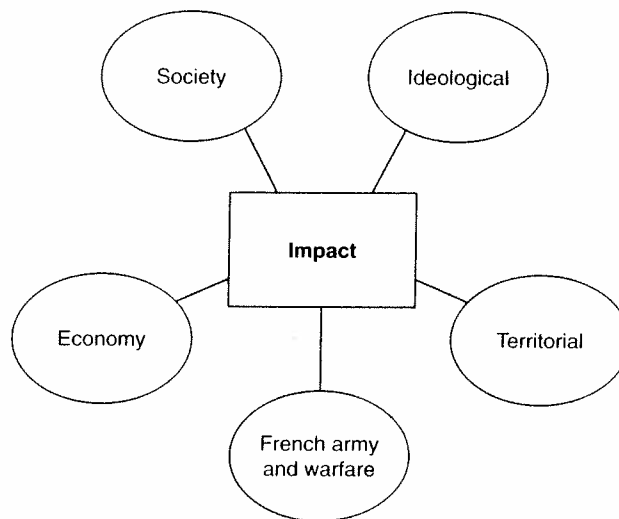
National self-determination

The right of national groups such as Italians, Poles and Germans to govern themselves.

Key terms

the French Revolution and the doings of Napoleon opened the eyes of the world. The nations knew nothing before and the people thought that kings were gods upon the earth and that they were bound to say that whatever they did was well done. Through this present change it is more difficult to rule the people.

Summary diagram: The impact of the French Revolution



6 | The Key Debate

The relationship between the Revolution and the economy has produced a lively debate among both political and economic historians over the course of the last half-century. Marxist historians have sought to place the economic upheavals endured by France into their own ideological framework for interpreting history. These notions are rejected with equal commitment by other historians. A central question which scholars try and address is:

What impact did the French Revolution have on the economy?

Jacques Solé

Professor Solé argues, that the Marxist view which calls the Revolution a decisive stage in the development of the capitalist economy and industrial society is easily belied by the stagnation of the French economy as a whole during the revolutionary period and beyond, and is essentially a myth. He believes that the ending of feudalism in France did not lead to rural capitalism.

William Doyle

Doyle suggests that it was the great left-wing historian Jean Jaurès (*Socialist History of the French Revolution*) who emphasised for the

first time the economic and social dimension of the Revolution while adding an element of Marxist analysis into the study. Marx had not written a great deal on the French Revolution, but Doyle believes that it was easy to dovetail a movement that attacked the privileged orders of the first two estates into a theory that emphasised class struggle and the conflict between capitalism and feudalism. For those subscribing to this viewpoint the French Revolution was a key moment in modern history when the capitalist bourgeoisie overthrew the feudal nobility. For Marxists, the Revolution paved the way for the emergence of capitalism in the economic development of France

Florin Aftalion

Professor Aftalion's was one of the first to focus purely on an economic interpretation of the French Revolution. He believes that the history of the Revolution is based on as many myths as facts, notably in the work of Marxist historians. According to Aftalion the decisions taken by the Constituent Assembly in 1789 inevitably led to a deepening financial and economic crisis, and to increasingly radical and disastrous policies. While noting the collapse in agricultural and industrial production between 1792 and 1795, he stresses that the existence of special factors allowed the development of some branches of the French economy such as heavy industry and the cotton industry. The unification of the national market and the introduction of a metric system were also positive benefits.

Simon Schama

Schama stresses the great contrasts that existed in pre-revolutionary France and the enormous disparities of wealth within the country. However, this was not a country with an economy 'doddering its way to the grave'. As Schama so carefully points out there were in economic terms two Frances. One, bolstered by the profits of Colonial trade, was dynamic, energetic, and prosperous. The other, in contrast, was backward, stagnant and deeply traditional. If the Revolution created a highly centralised and militarised economy, it also paved the way to its modernisation.

Some key books in the debate

Florin Aftalion, *The French Revolution: An Economic Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Alfred Cobban, *The Social Interpretation of the French Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 1964).

William Doyle, *The French Revolution: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

Simon Schama, *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution* (Viking, 1989).

Jacques Solé, *Questions of the French Revolution* (Pantheon Books, 1989).
